

Statement of Congressman Scott Tipton
April 11th, 2013
Before the House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Regulations
Legislative Hearing on HR 818, “The Healthy Forest Management and Wildfire Prevention Act”

Thank you Chairman Hastings for holding today’s hearing and for including my legislation, HR 818, the Healthy Forest Management and Wildfire Prevention Act. I also want to thank Commissioners John Martin and Cindy Dozier who were willing to make the trip out from Colorado to speak to an issue they know as well or better than any. I would also like to thank my fellow members of the Natural Resources Committee and members of the Colorado Delegation who have dedicated their time to working with me on this critical legislation.

I would also like to take a moment to thank our Nation’s wildland fire fighters and first responders. I had the privilege of meeting some of these brave men and women a few weeks ago in Craig, Colorado. I think it is important to acknowledge the efforts of these folks and their colleagues. Regardless of the differences we may have on forest policy, I know that everyone on this committee shares this appreciation.

The bark beetle epidemic, rampant drought, and deteriorating forest health conditions have increased the propensity for devastating wildfires throughout the Western United States. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, last year more than 9.3 million acres of land burned. That is an area approximately the size of Rhode Island, Delaware, the District of Columbia and Massachusetts combined. These fires tragically claimed thirteen lives, destroyed more than 2,000 homes and led to hundreds of millions of dollars in damages.

While the bark beetle outbreak and other hazardous forest health conditions have affected state and private lands, hazardous conditions are often most heavily concentrated on federal lands where a lack of active forest management has allowed the epidemic to spread to catastrophic levels. Of the 6.6 million acres infested by the mountain pine beetle in Colorado, over 4 million acres – an area larger than Connecticut – are on federal forest lands. Federal efforts to responsibly manage our forests and prevent the conditions for the fires that have raged across Colorado and other Western states have been hampered by an unwieldy regulatory framework that systemically prevents progress toward healthy forests.

H.R. 818 gives greater control to states and communities most directly affected by these conditions, and provides a pathway for comprehensive, landscape level planning with a local emphasis. Tools that give greater voice to local communities in decision making have historically been among the most effective and broadly supported land management measures, and this very notion is at the heart of this bill.

The community centric focus of this legislation builds on the bipartisan Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 by empowering states, counties, and tribes to have a more active role in addressing these emergency circumstances, we can proactively manage our forests, reduce future

destruction from wildfires, safeguard water supplies and species habitats, and promote a healthy natural environment.

Using the tools in Healthy Forests Restoration Act which have proven to be effective, the Healthy Forest Management and Wildfire Prevention Act can help reduce the cost imposed on taxpayers due to litigation, expedite emergency mitigation procedures, and restore our forests before they go up in flames, when the costs are far greater. H.R. 818 prioritizes conservation and will help reduce the investment required of taxpayers by making public private partnerships more feasible.

The Healthy Forest Management and Wildfire Prevention Act is the result of years of committee work, meetings with the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and other agencies, meetings with county and state officials, and with constituents; as well as Congressional hearings on forest management. Everyone that we talked to agreed that more needs to be done to manage our federal forests. This legislation is the outgrowth of that stakeholder engagement. This is further bared out by the groundswell of support that we have received for this legislation from groups on both sides of the political spectrum.

This bill allows those who are most directly impacted by wildfire to take proactive measures to address the problem and mitigate the root causes of catastrophic wildfire. The status quo is no longer good enough. The status quo has given us decades of declining forest health, the status quo has given us years of increasingly catastrophic wildfires, the status quo puts people, communities and ecosystems and risk. It's time to take a stand, it's time for action. I urge my colleagues to join an already strong coalition of support for this common sense bill that takes steps to address the critical state of Western Forests.

I'm proud to have the support of a multitude of state and national forester associations, conservation districts, sportsman groups, traditional and renewable energy developers, fish and wildlife agencies, and numerous counties across the state of Colorado and elsewhere in the West, and without objection I request to submit their letters of support for the record.

Thank you.